

## ***Head Of Fire***

I'd worked for Mr Christou for sixteen years, ever since his son was knee high to a grasshopper. I'd never met Mrs Christou, but I'd met enough people who had, to realise where the boy got his fiery temperament. I'd seen her photographs too; she'd been a big woman in every sense of the word. The other staff said she's dominated her husband. That must have been some feat because he was well over six feet himself, and although he had never been a violent man, he knew how to handle himself, and conducted his business, all his affairs in a self-confident manner. Nobody ever put one over on Stavros Christou.

He'd taken me on shortly after she died. Twenty-eight years old and struck down like that! Stavros had been devastated, she was all he'd had. There had been no family on either side in fact, which was not what I'd have expected from two people who'd both had such strict Catholic upbringings and who both attended church regularly. But I'd learned quite a lot about the Christou family as the years had gone by. For a start, Stavros Christou's real surname had been something hideously unpronounceable to the Anglo-Saxon tongue. Not Christoudopollos, that would have been bad enough, but something entirely different. He'd changed it by affidavit in 1957, soon after he'd arrived in this country. In Greece, he'd worked for his uncle; in fact, he'd been brought up by his uncle and aunt. His wife had, coincidentally, been brought up under similar circumstances, and though they had lived fifty miles apart in Greece and were total strangers, they had met up in London by a series of remarkable coincidences. They'd both left Greece about the same time, they'd worked for the same employer in the East End where they'd first met, then he had gone up to Manchester for a while, and on returning a year later, he'd started work in a factory in Hammersmith where Christina had moved a week before.

They were both terribly superstitious so it had seemed like an omen. Then Stavros's uncle died and left him a small legacy. Another series of fortunate coincidences had given him the chance to buy the café, and since that day, they had not looked back. Stavros had always wanted to own his own business. She'd been younger than him, a mere eighteen years old when she'd come to England, which was terribly young for a Greek girl to be venturing abroad in the world, especially at that time. Then she'd died, just like that, for no apparent reason.

Because he'd had no one else, the boy had become Stavros's world. He had twice considered remarrying, he'd even brought a girl over from Greece, a penpal, paid her fare and everything, with the idea of giving his son a new mother. But nothing had come of it, and, after having a few girlfriends here and there, he had eventually given up. The truth was both that Stavros was not a particularly attractive man and that apart from Christina, he had never shown much interest in the opposite sex, nor in people in general for that matter. Despite being tall and impressively built, his face was slightly pockmarked and a scar on his right cheek gave him a misleadingly cruel appearance, a bit like a Greek gangster. The face was a lie, rotten teeth and all. Once you got to know him, Stavros was a kind and generous man, not without a deeper humanity, but being a loner he never showed it. Also, although he had stopped five years ago, Stavros had been a life-long chain smoker; that was the only thing I'd never liked about him. His wife had been a non-smoker, neither of them had drunk more than the odd glass of wine, and they had both been very non-materialistic. Still, Christina had had a one hell of a temper. Over the years as I'd got a little closer to Stavros, as close as anyone could get, he'd told me a handful of anecdotes about his late wife's fiery temper; she was, he said, never so beautiful as in anger, and this anger had certainly been passed on to Leandros.

**Leandros was nineteen now, and although many teenagers are enigmas to their parents, you'd have to travel a long way to find one who was a bigger puzzle than was Leandros to his father. He'd been a big child, a big baby in fact, and by the time he was seventeen he was already an inch taller than his giant of a father. He'd first got into trouble at the tender age of eight when he'd thumped a twelve year old so hard that he'd broken two of the boy's ribs. He had also been involved in gang fights and in petty vandalism, smashing telephone boxes, that sort of thing.**

**Of course, the police hadn't been able to bring charges when he was that young, but on more than one occasion they had warned Stavros that unless he at least kept his son under proper parental control, there was a very real possibility that the social services would take the boy away from him. At first, Stavros had beaten him unmercifully, but Leandros' spirit had not been broken. Then he had kept him in the flat, (they lived above the café), refused to give him any pocket money, threatened to disown him, pampered him, pleaded with him, you name it, Stavros had tried it, but no matter what he did, he failed completely to tame his unruly son.**

**Initially, Leandros would promise to behave himself, and, with genuine resolve, would manage to stay out of trouble for 48 hours, or even a week. But sooner or later, usually sooner, he was back in the old routine and the police, schoolteachers and Uncle Tom Cobbley and all would be queuing up at the café counter.**

**In our respect though, Stavros was lucky. Ever since he'd been old enough to understand what honesty meant, Leandros had had a strict sense of moral justice drummed into him. He had never stolen anything in his life, and his honesty was, at times, disarming. In fact it was often Leandros's sense of moral justice, which at times bordered on outrage, and his honesty, coupled with his complete lack of tact, which got him into trouble, certainly from the age of sixteen.**

This was not always to be scorned. I personally had had cause to be grateful to Leandros on more than one occasion. Often I would serve, clear the tables and the like in the café. Officially I was the dishwasher, but I did everything from unblocking the drains to collecting orders from the cash and carry. Some of the people who frequented the caf were a little on the rough side, not just building site workers and lorry drivers, but at times what might generally be termed riff-raff. Being a cripple I was now and then the subject of unwelcome attention, occasional cruel jibes and spiteful remarks. On two occasions in close succession customers had picked on me for no apparent reason. Well, the second time a man had knocked over a cup of scalding hot tea as I was serving him and had blamed me. Leandros had been present on both occasions and had ejected the trouble makers.

Now and then we used to have heart to heart talks, one time I remember especially. He had been sixteen at the time and had been suspended from school for punching a boy who had insulted Greeks.

“You really must learn to control your temper,” I told him, “most of the people you hit aren’t worth the trouble.”

“You never hit anyone?”

“Not recently,” I said, “but even if I were your size I wouldn’t want to hit people every time I thought they’d insulted me.”

“Listen,” said Leandros, “just because you a cripple doesn’t mean you have to eat shit for anyone. Nobody fuck with Leandros. Even if I your size, somebody make fun of me, I smash his face. Nobody fuck with Leandros!”

As he said his, he stood up and smashed down on the table with his fist.

“Hey, hey,” said his father, “we got customers out here.”

The conversation had ended there, but the fire in his eyes showed how quickly he could be roused, and indeed, how easy it was for people to wind him up with intent.

These past few weeks, Leandros had been in an unpleasant mood, half the time acting like a jack-in-the-box, the other half like a bear with a sore head. The cause of his problems this time had been a girl. He had developed a mad passion for a young Hindu girl at his old school. He had flunked out after one year of A Level, but most of his friends were still students. He only worked three days a week, doing dispatch work: driving and riding. The job was well paid so he always had plenty of money; he helped out in the café too.

What was so special about this girl was difficult to say; I'd seen her once, sure, she was attractive, but so are most seventeen year old girls. Leandros had gone bananas about her and had showered her with flowers, gifts and an engagement ring. She liked him, despite parental disapproval on both sides. Indians generally and Hindus in particular don't like the idea of their kind marrying outside the tribe. Nor did Stavros like the thought of having an Indian for a daughter-in-law, principally because he hated the smell of curry.

Although the girl liked him, in spite of her young age, she clearly had an old head on her shoulders because she soon realised that he was becoming obsessed with her. At first she had tried to play it cool, then she took to standing him up and being busy all the time. If Leandros lacked tact, he was also very slow to take a hint, so eventually she had to tell him outright that she didn't want to see him anymore. At first he had laughed at her: "You can't be serious, baby; we gonna get married, me an' you."

Then he'd sweet-talked her, pleaded with her and finally threatened. One night he waited for her outside the school, and dragged her off to a quiet spot. Although he'd stopped short of actually hitting the girl, he had shaken her a lot, gripped her wrists and terrified her by threatening to kill first her, and then himself.

Fortunately the police hadn't been called in, but the following evening, just after closing time, Stavros was faced with an irate Indian banging on the café door demanding to see his son. Stavros had called upstairs to Leandros, and when the diminutive Asian had seen the size of him, he had redirected his anger at Stavros who, although a big man himself, was less intimidating to assault verbally. He began shrieking and shouting at Stavros to keep his son away from his daughter or he would be sorry, they would both be sorry. Leandros tried to interrupt, but Stavros shouted, "Shut your mouth!"

"But Dad, I..."

"Shut your mouth, boy. Go on," he said to the man.

When the little Indian had finished speaking, Stavros became enraged and began cuffing Leandros about the head, pulling his hair and drawing blood from his nose. Eventually Leandros curled up into a ball in the corner until Stavros had finished. Finally, the older man caught his breath, then turned back to the Indian who seemed content with what he had seen.

"All right, Sir, my son will never bother your daughter again. Please leave us now."

Stavros sat down exhausted. I finished clearing away the tables as Leandros sat and wept softly like a girl.

Leandros could easily have defended himself against his father's onslaught, but Stavros was the one person in the world Leandros was not just frightened, but terrified of. And the fear was not for himself, but for his father.

When he was twelve, Leandros had been caught red-handed smoking. Stavros had cuffed the boy about the head, they had struggled and he had tried to put him across his knee to thrash him. He might just have succeeded, but suddenly as they wrestled together, Stavros had clutched his chest and dropped to the floor like a stone. I'd witnessed the entire scene and fortunately, being ex-St John's Ambulance, I'd known exactly what to do. Stavros had nearly stopped breathing, and later the hospital told us he'd had a slight heart attack. His years of chain smoking had caught up with him and he was suffering from coronary heart disease.

Stavros had been advised to give up smoking or die; he'd chosen life and had never smoked another cigarette since, nor had Leandros. But, in the few days he had been detained in hospital, his son had become a changed person. He'd visited his father twice a day, sitting holding his hand. I'd moved into the spare room to look after him and manage the café; at the time, I was the only regular employee. Every night I'd heard Leandros crying himself to sleep, clutching his crucifix and praying audibly to Jesus not to let his father die. Even now there was a lot of the frightened little boy in Leandros; his father had been warned not to work too hard and to take proper holidays, which he never did. Sometimes if he appeared to be breathing heavily, Leandros would stand over him and watch him like a hawk. This time though, Stavros caught his breath quickly, and the momentary signs of stress passed without further effect.

Leandros always felt humiliated when his father struck him, or told him to shut up in front of customers, but as ever, he bit his tongue and swallowed his pride. But there was no denying that this incident and the affair, or rather the non-affair with the girl had made him more volatile than ever.

**This evening we were working late, until ten o'clock. Stavros never had customers after about eight, six most nights, but he also did outside catering in a small way, and tonight we were doing buffet lunches for a function. Tom, the only other member of the staff, had left about seven, so Stavros and I were working alone. Leandros had finished work about four o'clock and had been hanging around the café ever since, making small talk which neither of us was listening to.**

**"Think I'll go out tonight, Dad."**

**"Uuuuhhh."**

**"Do you want these other onions peeled, Stavros?"**

**"Uuuhhh? Not yet. Make us some tea first."**

**"Okay," I said, "Leandros?"**

**"Me? No thanks." A while later he asked, "Dad, you ever play draw poker?"**

**"Draw what?"**

**"Poker. Y'know, five card."**

**"You gamblin' again? I tell you not to gamble. Only man ever wins you gamble: the bookie."**

**"It's not with a bookie, Dad, it's with a friend."**

**"Good Catholics never gamble," said Stavros, continuing to butter a big pile of bread.**

**"Shouldn't gamble with friends," I chipped in, "friends are for pleasure, not to make money out of."**

**"That's what I told him."**

**I passed the tea to Stavros.**

**"Thanks."**

**"I'm goin' out to play poker."**



**“Don’t lose all yer fuckin’ money; you gotta pay rent this week!” shouted Stavros as his son left.**

**The door slammed behind him, and Stavros continued buttering the bread.**

**“The boy’s crazy, fuckin’ crazy. What he want to gamble for? He makin’ two hundred pound a fuckin’ week.”**

**“Uuuhhh.” It was my turn to grunt.**

**Two hours later, we were still slaving away. I was washing up some utensils in the sink. Stavros was out the front packing sandwiches into greaseproof bags. The back door gave an inch as someone tried to open it; I looked up, recognised the silhouette, and let Leandros in. As he came in, the phone rang in the hall.**

**“I’ll get it,” shouted Stavros.**

**I paid little attention to Leandros as I scrubbed the big mixing basin in one of the sinks, sleeves rolled up, water all over the floor; I noticed he was quiet, subdued in fact. He could be sulky at times, but he was seldom like this.**

**“Poker game didn’t last long,” I said.**

**“Just the two of us,” came his voice in a near whisper.**

**“Hope you didn’t lose all your rent,” I laughed, just making conversation and hoping to get home to bed before eleven.**

**“I didn’t lose nothin’; caught him cheatin’.”**

**“That your friend, was it? Some friend.”**

**I scrubbed away with a brillo pad. I could hear Stavros mumbling into the telephone in the hall.**

**Leandros continued, “I caught him dealing off the bottom; he give me four kings and give himself four aces. He tried to take all my money, but I see him, what he doin’. I say: Nobody fuck with Leandros, not even you, Tony.”**

**“Hope you didn’t lose your temper,” I said, “though I suppose you had a right to this time.”**

**“I hit ’im,” said Leandros, “I get ’im up against the wall an’ I hit ’im, an’ again, an’, again, an’ again.”**

**If I hadn’t been on the go since 7am I’d surely have realised something was wrong, what he was telling me, his voice was so unnaturally quiet.**

**“I teach him real good,” he paused, “but I wish I hadn’t.”**

**I turned around and saw that his right hand was stained with blood, and his shirt was splashed all down the front with red/brown stains of what could only have been the same. I hadn’t even realised he was in his shirtsleeves. I stood staring at him; his eyes had a faraway look.**

**Stavros put the phone down, and as he entered the room there were already tears in his eyes. He looked at his son, standing open-mouthed and motionless, held out his arms and approached him. He was overcome with emotion. He wrapped his arm around Leandros and pulled him to his chest.**

**“My baby, my baby, what have you done? O sweet Jesus, what have you done?”**

**Stavros wept like a widow in mourning; Leandros stood transfixed like a zombie. They were still standing together five minutes later when four men walked in through the front of the café and took the boy away.**